Cityscape

Another One for the Record Books

National Archives' Suburban Annex Offers Space but Not Much Character

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By Benjamin Forgey
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The contrast could hardly be greater. Downtown, the monumental cube of the National Archives—solemn, weighty, 72 Corinthian columns, bronze doors bigger than row houses, stone figures sculpted to awe. In College Park, "Archives II"—also huge, but crisp and clean and white, sprawling across the landscape, almost hidden from casual view by thickets of tall trees.

Yet in function the buildings are the same. Both are warehouses for the tremendous array of documents generated by the federal government—at a cost of $250 million, Archives II was built to accommodate the overflow from Archives I. Both are research centers for expert and amateur alike. Both house scientific laboratories to investigate better ways to preserve records.

There are obvious reasons for the differences—changing times, contrasting locations, new standards and techniques for handling documents—and there's no simple answer to the inevitable comparative question: Which is better?

In certain ways the new building is a refreshing change. Designed by the Washington office of Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, it is very, very good at storing records efficiently with proper climatic controls, and at providing commodious, well-lighted places for people to work in. Archivists, scientists, administrators, janitors, visiting researchers—everybody—will welcome the new working conditions and the well-lighted spaces.

These are no mean achievements, and they're just the things the old building doesn't do well. Except for a handful of top officials with windowed offices on "mahogany row"—so-called because of the big, beautiful doors—most employ-

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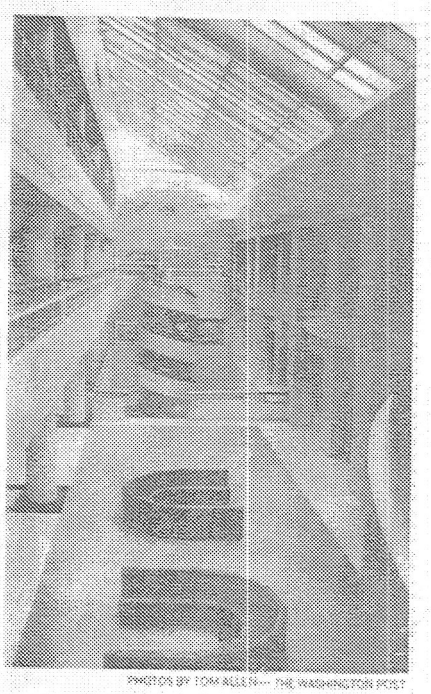

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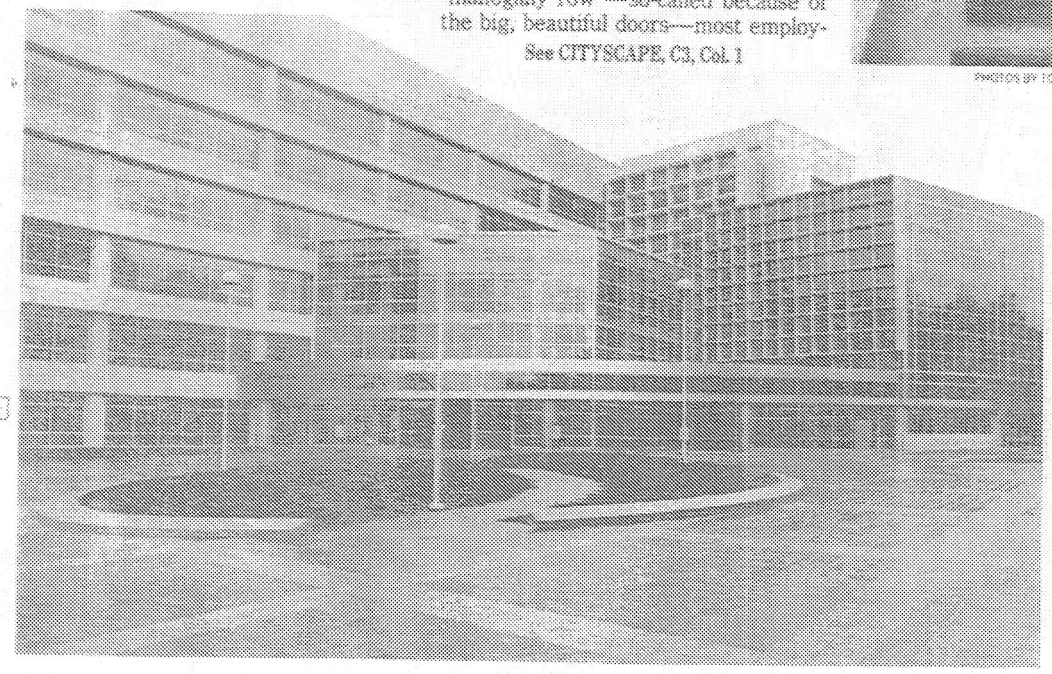


The new National Archives complex in College Park stretches out to suit its 33-acre site. The interior design combines light-filled public spaces and tightly sealed areas for document storage. Above, one of the skylighted atria ends with a cantilevered spiral stairwell.

Archives Old and New

CITYSCAPE, From C1

ees in the downtown building are squeezed into this or that cranny. Accommodations for researchers are crowded and inadequate. Getting from here to there can be a labyrinthine adventure. The vintage '30s storage rooms are picturesque, humid and inefficient, especially when compared to the surgical surreality of Archives II's "high-density mobile storage units."

On the other hand, the new building lacks the resonant character of the old. It may be that even in the '30s, when the original was built, a neoclassical cube was hardly the ideal solution to the problems of conserving, storing and retrieving vast numbers of documents. But the location, at 8th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue NW in the developing Federal Triangle, at midpoint between the Capitol and the White House, was one of the most important symbolic sites in the city. And John Russell Pope, the architect, knew how to respond.

His National Archives building is a harmonious encyclopedia of neoclassical devices—pediments, colonnades, entablatures, figurative sculptures, medallions, moldings, and on and on—deployed with immense skill for symbolic effect. There is perhaps no more moving piece of architectural theater in the capital than the baroque rotunda Pope devised for the democracy's most valued documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Although the differences between Archives I and II suggest powerful oppositions—tradition vs. modernity, figuration against abstraction, symbolic representation instead of straightforward functionalism—the arguments are more interesting in theory than in fact. To get the point, one only has to picture this: the downtown building in that suburban field, the suburban building in that downtown square. It's almost needless to say that, so out of place, each would look absurd.

Working with the engineers of Ellerbe Becket, the architects of the new building (HOK's Larry Sauer, principal designer, with Ron Kessler, Robert Barr and Terry Maroit) responded intelligently to a long list of client demands and constraints imposed by the site. And, with the significant help of the primary contractors (the George Hyman Construction and Gilbane Building Cos.), they came in under budget, Barr proudly reports. The $6 million saved was used to help cover the costs of the still ongoing move of materials from downtown and other locations.

The building is located between Adelphi and Metzerott roads on 33 acres leased from the University of Maryland, whose main campus lies to the east. The sloping site is framed by stands of mature deciduous trees, and the architects took advantage of both the slope and the trees. Their building, about half as big as the Pentagon, is almost totally screened from both roadways and it stretches downhill about 1,100 feet from south to north.

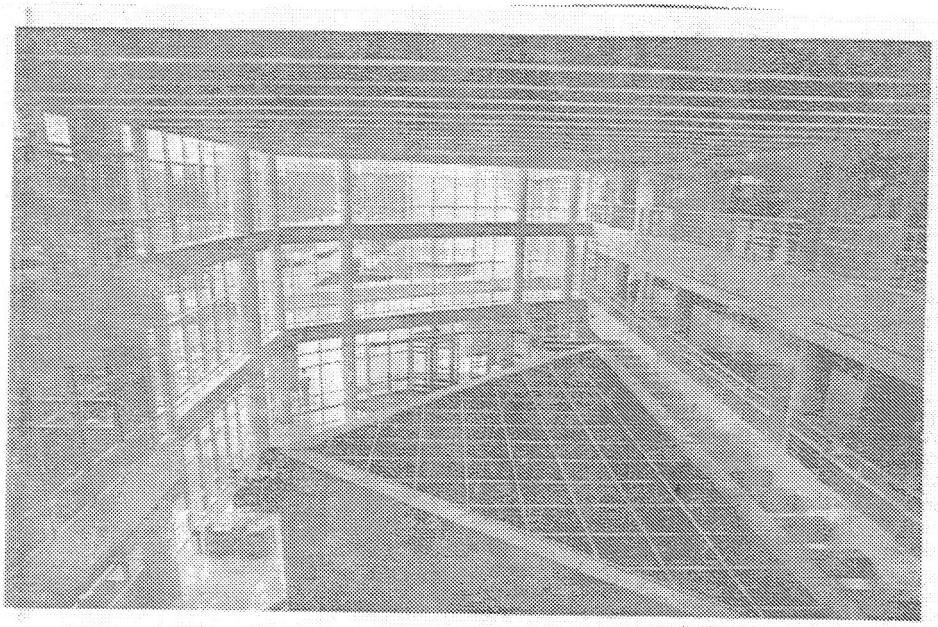
Though a higher, more monolithic rectangle would have been the most efficient shape—stacks on top of stacks on top of stacks—the stretched-out building is much more appropriate to the site. But the danger of monotony remained. The architects confronted it with some success, making the building a series of five connected pieces, three of which march downhill on a diagonal, like a parade of Brobdingnagian bricks.

Besides limiting the impression of bulk, this arrangement also enabled the architects to maximize opportunities to shape public and semi-public spaces. Each of the three downhill "pods," for instance, is greatly enlivened by a six-story, skylighted atrium separating offices, labs and other service functions from those surreal storage chambers. The last of these atria ends with a cantilevered spiral stairwell, like an architectural exclamation point.

The main entrance, at the top of the slope closest to Adelphi Road, is an ordered collision of rectilinear and rounded forms, each with a different glazing pattern. This strong, satisfying, asymmetrical composition announces the building's principal motif: It's light-filled in front, where people do their work, and sealed tightly in back, where the documents are stored.

Behind one of these facades is a high, rather scaleless lobby that leads to, among other things, a pleasant public cafeteria. Behind another of these walls of glass is the sensational main reading room, three stories high. A paved outdoor terrace and an arcade add needed touches of human scale. All in all, the face-off between the big building and the nearby tall trees is surprisingly harmonious. This isn't exactly the pristine machine in a garden that modern architects delight in, but it's an oddly graceful, if lumbering, machine in a forest.

Actually, Archives I and II make a complementary pair, and the completion of the new building focuses attention on the needs of the old. Pope's temple of learning is glorious, but it's also fading rather fast. There's hardly a room in it that works satisfactorily by contemporary standards. Even the rotunda is showing serious signs of age. And the antiquated air-handling system will have to be replaced. There's an exhilarating opportunity here: The great old building in the center of town could, and should, become more accessible and more meaningful to more people.



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The comfort level at the Archives' new center in College Park should please researchers accustomed to the downtown building's cramped facilities and outdated air-handling system.